

Teaching Literature as an Ethic of Care

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How can literature teachers foster an ethic of care in the classroom? How can literature and imaginative pedagogical strategies facilitate education of the moral imagination and overall training of the ethical thinker? This essay explores some theoretical reflections on moral education through literature and, in particular, suggests practical pedagogy that has application in K-12 as well as college/university classrooms. I approach this topic in the following way: (a) considerations surrounding the position of teaching literature as an ethic of care; (b) a view of a selection of children's novels suitable for K-12 language arts as well as post-secondary study (Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*; Katherine Paterson, *Jacob Have I Loved*; Jean Little, *Willow and Twig*); and (c) an emphasis on teaching ideas for drama and writing exercises that include the use of maxims and themes such as experiencing the mythic, the ethical journey, and teaching moral courage as features of the moral imagination.

Teaching Literature as an Ethic of Care

Teaching literature as an ethic of care is perhaps not the first thing that comes to mind as the primary mandate of the literature teacher. What comes to mind more easily is the importance of developing intellectual analysis and the capacity to carry on detailed discussion in traditional academic prose. Teaching literature as a means of moral education—specifically with the goal to foster caring, humane thinkers—may even sound like a bit of an oddity if we believe, as many of us teaching literature to some extent do believe, that the object of literary study has much more to do with appreciating what others see and think and feel rather than what we personally hold to be good and true. And of course if we believe even to some degree that literature education should be informed by a sense of “art for art’s sake”, perhaps without calling for a moral response or in view of the reader’s moral development, then the idea of literature as a tool to train the moral imagination may seem counter to the mandate of the literature teacher. Certainly teaching literature in terms of ethical education raises the spectre of the old cautionary tale tradition where moralizing had

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a higher premium than excellent storytelling. While I cannot do justice to this book-length topic in the space of this essay, I would nonetheless like to sketch a few ideas to contribute to the discussion.

The position of "art for art's sake" in the last two centuries is a relatively recent phenomenon. Its apparent objectivity is often regarded as the antidote to education-as-inculcation. But an absolutist adherence to "art for art's sake" from the position of moral relativity can also be a form of inculcation. As one of my Curriculum Development students passionately wrote in her journal in response to Charles Taylor's critique of contemporary ethical malaise (1991), and other writers calling for moral vision in the classroom (Noddings, 1999; Van Brummelen, 1991; Weissbourd, 2003),

how is it surprising then to find our society in a dangerous plight, one in which, according to Taylor, there are no commonly upheld morals?

As a student and as a future teacher, I feel cheated: cheated because this is how I was *taught* to believe, trained even to speak and think and perpetuate. Perhaps those who were teaching me truly believed that they were combating racism, prejudice, bigotry. And here we are, generations of mushy, truthless goo, linking only to those other islands when it is beneficial to us.¹

To what extent, then, are we cheating students by ignoring moral education? And how in particular can literature teachers foster an ethic of care through their discipline?

Teaching literature as a means of moral education is perhaps not so much an oddity when one considers its long history and the particular power of story to train the moral imagination. As I have argued elsewhere (Hilder, 2003) and as Vigen Guroian (1998) also argues, the oddity is perhaps the other way around in that what has been regarded as literature's most serious purpose from Plato onwards—to teach virtue—has been out of fashion with literature teachers in recent times. Ironically, whereas voices in the fields of psychology (Bettelheim, 1975), ethical philosophy (MacIntyre, 1984), and education (Egan, 1992; Noddings, 2002; Walsh, 1959; Whitehead 1929) join with several voices in the field of literature (Booth, 1988; Frye, 1963; Gardner, 1978; Lewis, 1947; Lochhead, 1977) in looking to story as the most effective means to moral development due to its imaginative and therefore holistic educative power, much of contemporary literary discourse and classroom practice is curiously silent on what literature can do best. In my own journey as a literature teacher, I was originally more convinced of the "objectivity" of the discipline and became increasingly concerned over the need to choose literature and devise strategies that educate for spiritual well being. This shift was particularly fuelled by conversation with my secondary and post-secondary students about much of the "depressing" literature that tends to dominate the curriculum (and that at a time when young adults especially wrestle with emotional development), and by my similar growing sense that it is a serious error to value intellectual achievement apart from ethical development, that it is in fact, as C. S. Lewis argues, an "outrage" to regard people without moral sensibility as "Intellectuals" (1947, pp. 34–35). In response I have become increasingly concerned about choosing literature and practising imaginative pedagogy that would nurture the moral

imagination. In the huge task of educating for analytical and writing skills, I suggest that we consider the still greater and ever vital task of also shaping moral understanding. To cite George MacDonald, an author who particularly excelled in creating compelling literary experiences of moral goodness, though few students may develop "artistic faculty ... it is necessary that all should feel ... that all should understand and imagine the good" (1893, p. 41).

In response to the position of moral relativism, then, literature teachers should consider that we can indeed speak of many enduring moral values—qualities such as courage, perseverance, and hope, to name a few—and that it is our highest mandate and indeed privilege to foster these moral values with our students. As Nel Noddings says, the primary educational task is that of educating "the moral sentiments" with "the main aim ... to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people", and literature teachers in particular ought to choose works that can achieve this (2002). Similarly, Wayne C. Booth (1988) argues for the necessity of teachers practising ethical criticism in choosing literature of strong moral character. And Madeleine L'Engle insists,

Those of us who write are responsible for the effect of our books. Those who teach, who suggest books to either children or adults, are responsible for their choices. Like it or not, we either add to the darkness of indifference and out-and-out evil which surrounds us or we light a candle to see by ... Our responsibility to [children] is not to pretend that if we don't look, evil will go away, but to give them weapons against it. (1972, p. 99)

I suggest that our task is to choose wisely literature that celebrates virtue (though not to the exclusion of others) and to implement imaginative teaching strategies that engage our students with this in mind. I turn now to a few sample novels that can nurture the moral imagination. These are, to borrow Booth's terms, a few excellent "friends" among many possible others.

Children's Novels that Encourage the Ethic of Care

The following titles are strong examples of literature that can foster spiritual well being. They are a mix of fantasy and realistic fiction, suitable for K-12 language arts as well as post-secondary study. In the genre of fantasy, Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* is the first in this time-travel trilogy where the children become spiritual warriors in a battle that baffles adults. It is a powerful story that challenges disembodied rationalism and celebrates faith, hope, and love. The second novel, *A Wind in the Door*, explores the battle between good and evil on the microbiological level and also teaches unimaginative adults to become imaginative and therefore better equipped to participate in the fray. In the third novel, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, young adults battle for planet earth and learn that individual choices made across history and place have vital importance. And in the genre of realistic fiction, in *Jacob Have I Loved*, Katherine Paterson follows the journey of adolescence through sibling rivalry and troubled self-esteem to young adulthood. This redemptive story grapples with the serious matter of inner spiritual darkness and the possibilities of both crippling bitterness and healing. And Jean Little's *Willow and Twig* portrays what life is like for pre-teen street

children in Vancouver's downtown eastside. This a remarkable tale of hope born out of suffering that challenges the spiritual values and politics of contemporary culture.

Drawing upon the above novels as illustration, I turn now to pedagogical strategies that facilitate education of the moral imagination and overall training of the ethical thinker.

Teaching Ideas for Drama and Writing Exercises

The biggest obstacle to trying new ideas in teaching, perhaps, is the time-energy-benefits equation. "How much time will this take in teacher preparation?" "In class time?" Add to this the pressure of standardized tests, and we are quick to ask, "Will this help achieve what my students will be tested on or will it take away from their ability to perform?" And, "Is it worth the effort all around?" These are always important questions and I suggest that the following teaching ideas, some very short, like the maxims, and others potentially longer, are indeed practical ones that are readily implemented and will, as imaginative pedagogy does, facilitate deeper understanding than merely rationalistic approaches.

In order to introduce quickly and have students bond with new ideas I have found it both useful and delightful to capitalize on a quality that is already present in culture and perhaps human nature: the fondness of chanting. Be that young children in the playground who enjoy familiar sing-song sayings or invent new ones (though it's said this happens far less in our television age—the more reason to revive it), or older crowds breaking out in spontaneous chorus at sports events, there is something attractive and bonding about words when experienced emotionally and physically. (Certainly this persuasive tool can also be dangerous—as political dictators well know.) To have only rational understanding in the narrow sense is to be "a half-wit"; to understand deeply and well and in a lasting way involves the whole person. Given this fondness for chanting then, it has seemed reasonable to me to introduce a very accessible idea: maxims or choice quotables as a quick introductory drama exercise in the classroom that helps us engage with the text in an immediate way. Literature is filled with rich sayings that may become wonderful living articles among our mental furniture, but this can only happen if these sayings are memorized in the best sense, embodied through emotion and physical drama, as it were.

So in workshops with colleagues and in classes with my university students I have introduced this concept of using maxims, most always at first to looks of puzzlement and sometimes incredulity, and then self-consciousness giving way to delight and enthusiasm. Education students tell me that they have remembered the saying they acted out for the class weeks later; certainly I'd find it hard to believe they would remember it so readily if it were something we had read and discussed once or twice. With a brief explanation of what a maxim is and that we're going to chant one as a class, I give an example, such as the one by Euripides quoted by Mrs Who in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, "Nothing is hopeless; we must hope for everything" (1962, p. 61). One way this could be delivered is in repeating sections, as a whole group or in chorus groups, as follows:

Nothing	Nothing	Nothing is hopeless;
We must hope	Hope	Hope
We must hope for everything	Everything	Everything.
We must hope for everything.		

Corresponding actions enrich the experience. This class exercise takes about five minutes and could be done with some regularity—a comic relief with lasting effect. (Recently one of my students complained that we didn't do maxims often enough, though initially some thought they had no place in a university literature class, including two latecomers who didn't enter the room because they thought it couldn't possibly be "our class" making that ruckus.) A more involved exercise that has perhaps even greater impact is when students in small groups are given a maxim which they prepare to present in class. Another variation of this exercise is to ask students to invent an appropriate maxim for a character or situation in the piece of literature being studied. And I have been amazed at the tremendous ingenuity that colleagues and students have come up with in their maxim presentations. This also gives the opportunity for rich discussion following each presentation. To illustrate, at one workshop teachers in pairs, after overcoming the usual shyness many of us feel about performance, tried out the following examples.

a) "Therre willl nno llonggerr bee sso many ppleasantt thinggss too llookk att iff rress-
 possible ppeople ddo nnott ddoo ssomethingg abboutt thee unnppleasantt ones."
 (Mrs Which, *A Wrinkle in Time*, p. 86)

Two teachers alternated reading parts of Mrs Which's sentence (about four words at a time), and the effect of the extra consonants so shared accentuated something that I could describe as "speaking through water"—a perfect and intuitively brilliant act which conveyed the fact that Mrs Which never can quite find the time and energy to fully materialize into an earthly body.

b) "Size is really quite relative." (Blajeny, *A Wind in the Door*, p. 145)

"But a child— One small child—why is he so important?" (Mr Jenkins)

"It is the pattern throughout Creation. One child, one man, can swing the balance of the universe." (Blajeny, *A Wind in the Door*, p. 179)

This one puzzled the teachers—it is more than a neat maxim, and just where did I get the idea that the possibilities for this exercise are endless, anyway? With a little encouragement and emphasis on the importance of chanting and repetition, they created an exchange where one person repeated "Size is really quite relative" in a patient, consistently assertive voice, inserting this response (about six times in total) as the other person read Mr Jenkins' and Blajeny's lines in a reflective voice with appropriate pauses to allow for the repeated maxim. Simple and effective.

c) "We do not always know what is important and what is not." (Gaudior, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, p. 210)

One teacher got excited about the possibility of illustrating this concept through a dramatic monologue of a character who was convinced of his absolute correctness in waging a "holy war" against what he perceived to be a false and dangerous religious group. He gave his argument in excited prose, *in medias res*, so that his listeners, not at first knowing his assumed identity (though otherwise very familiar with his source idea, the story of Saul of Tarsus persecuting the Christians, Acts 9), experienced the intensity of the character's psychological state. The other teacher dramatized the interjecting voice that changed the speaker's thinking, and their dramatic exchange opened and closed with the pair repeating the illustrative maxim in unison.

The following are some additional maxims taken from the texts under consideration in this article.

- "Wee wwill cconnttinue tto ffightt!" (Mrs Which, *A Wrinkle in Time*, p. 88).
- "Love isn't how you feel. It's what you do" (Proginoskes, *A Wind in the Door*, p. 162).
- "It is only when we are fully rooted that we are really able to move" (Senex, *A Wind in the Door*, p. 190).
- "I've learned that every time I've tried to control things we've had trouble" (Charles Wallace, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, p. 150).
- "You can make your own chances. But first you have to know what you're after, my dear" (Captain Hiram Wallace to Sara Louise, *Jacob Have I Loved*, p. 217).
- "I decided that if you can't catch crabs where you are, you move your pots" (Sara Louise, *Jacob Have I Loved*, p. 231).
- "Keep your chin up, kid. The darkest hour comes just before the dawn" (Constable Chang to Willow, *Willow and Twig*, p. 26).
- "Deep in my heart, I do believe we shall overcome someday" (Nell Jones, *Willow and Twig*, p. 70).

Then, beyond the shorter maxim exercises, I would like to suggest several longer drama and writing ideas for the K-12 and post-secondary classrooms. First, here are several activities that encourage imaginative engagement with literature:

- interview a character in the present narrative or some years later;
- speak as one of the characters, revealing his perspective;
- create a conversation between two or more characters;
- write a letter to a character;
- speak as a character who writes a letter to another character or to another audience altogether.

Each of these activities stretches the student's imaginative and so, arguably, analytical thinking. To "become" someone and speak in his or her voice requires an intensity of engagement that can lead to truly transformative work in which student interest fuels the development of passionately intelligent ideas. Even in the senior secondary or post-secondary classes, which place a much higher emphasis on expository essay

writing, and rightly so, some room can always be made for the storytelling kind of activity. In fact, encouraging some of this "creative" writing may be especially important at the higher grade levels because here too many students have already decided that the academic literary essay is not one they are particularly interested in excelling at, and therefore they have also, unfortunately, decided that literature study is either less accessible or simply unimportant to them. The more engaging assignments that require immediate identification with the characters and their conflicts draw students inside the centre of the story more easily—precisely where they need to be in order to appreciate and respond to literature. So the "creative" classroom approaches arguably also lead to stronger analytical thinking and expository writing.

To deepen the nature of these exercises as a practice of the ethic of care I suggest here a few examples for student activities that I have organized thematically. Specifically, I've identified three themes which illustrate the moral imagination and are central to these authors in particular: experiencing the mythic; the ethical journey; and teaching moral courage. (Certainly these themes are only a few of many more we could identify with the moral imagination.) All of these activities depend upon and foster the idea that the most important educational achievement is indeed teaching people to be caring ethical thinkers—and do so in ways that are highly literary, highly imaginative.

Experiencing the Mythic

Much may be said about mythic literature—what it is and why it matters. Again, to be very succinct here, I would like to emphasize two features. One, mythic literature has everything to do with conveying values we might think of as transcendent, values such as courage, valour, hope, and love. In Madeleine L'Engle's words, "True art has a mythic quality in that it speaks of that which was true, is true, and will be true" (1993, p. 199). Two, mythic literature can and often does give readers an intimate experience of the supernatural or "otherness" figures. This is important in different ways. For one, experience of "otherness" deconstructs the materialistic worldview that is a by-product of a technological society, and so gives students access to other worldviews. In C. S. Lewis's sense, such fantasy can be the good spell that breaks "the evil enchantment of worldliness" or materialism (1949, p. 5). For another, and in particular in the following examples, a character's encounter with or consideration of a beneficent supernatural figure stirs that character's moral imagination, sometimes with sensations of felicity, and at other times with more disturbing thoughts and emotions, but usually resulting in a deepening moral understanding.

For example, in her time trilogy, L'Engle frequently illustrates the comfort that supernatural figures offer the children. As she notes of her own literary mentor, George MacDonald, whose mythic stories created for her a sense of the world as one of love and meaning (1993, p. 113), so do L'Engle's stories convey this. This experience is closely linked with the characters' subsequent moral courage. Students might explore this through the following approach.

Choose an incident from a story where a human character meets a supernatural being such as Meg meeting Aunt Beast (*A Wrinkle in Time*), or Charles Wallace riding on the unicorn Gaudior (*A Swiftly Tilting Planet*). Or create your own incident, either borrowing a character and placing him in a different situation, or inventing another incident altogether. Imagine yourself as the human character encountering the mythic and reflect on your thoughts and feelings, as well as physical sensations during the meeting. What difference did this encounter make to you then? What difference does it make at a later point in time?

For another example, in *Willow and Twig*, Jean Little explores otherness as an imaginative friend, Red Mouse, perhaps an alter ego, who acts as a voice of strength. Frequently, Willow hears Red Mouse encourage her with truth, such as reminding her of her absent mother's butterfly kisses when she feels abandoned (p. 10), warning her to flee danger (p. 17), commanding her to take a chance and trust her grandmother (p. 101), and challenging her to transform her own pain and moral learning to helping her difficult great-aunt in need (p. 126). The presence of Red Mouse is complicated in interesting ways when one of Willow's initial reactions to the "big, heavy God" talked of in church (p. 210) is to prefer Red Mouse to him.

To enter the story with some of its possibilities students could choose to speak in Red Mouse's voice and narrate from his perspective. This could deepen the experience of Willow's journey and suggest insights that are perhaps implied in the novel but not fleshed out. Another approach could be to create a scenario where an imaginary friend acts as a moral guide. What difficulties does the moral guide encounter? How does he or she deal with them? Or, alternatively, write from the perspective of a character who has such a moral guide. What does it feel like? What does she learn? What does he wish for? These are all rich possibilities for development of the moral imagination.

The Ethical Journey

Each of these authors, as all authors with a distinct moral vision, is keen on exploring the moral struggle of her characters with a clear sense of loving and unloving, good and bad, ethical choices. For example, in *Jacob Have I Loved*, Katherine Paterson unabashedly explores spiritual darkness in Sara Louise's murderous hatred for her twin sister and also in Grandma Bradshaw's twisted sexual jealousy. In both characters' journeys moral ugliness leaves them in bondage, and relief and, in Sara Louise's case, later release, comes through caring relationships with others. In L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, Meg Murry struggles with a particularly nasty temper tantrum until she matures into choosing to fight the spiritual battle only she can fight. In Little's *Willow and Twig*, the siblings negotiate the moral substance and failings of various adults as they navigate the dangerous street-life of Vancouver's downtown eastside as well as supposed wellness in rural Ontario.

The experience of such literature, and especially with corresponding activities, can heighten sensitivity to the importance of moral choices. For example, students could choose one of the "nasty" characters in a story or, rather, a particularly nasty moment in his or her story and write from that person's viewpoint. How did this come about?

How is the person trapped? What tendencies could help lead to transformation? It would be fruitful to trace the gradual revelation that occurs as this character changes for the better; and if no revelation is given in the story, it would be instructive to invent one for a later time. What happened? How did this come about? How is that person changed, and in what ways does he still struggle with these moral issues?

Teaching Moral Courage

All of these authors create narratives in which their characters, and so their readers, are inspired to act out of moral courage. The heroes ultimately choose the right and best course of action, not the easiest or the most expedient, but the most noble and worthy. And it is clear that their moral courage is deepened through testing. So in L'Engle's *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, Charles Wallace battles evil across time and space, wrestling with his own arrogance as he learns to submit to guidance from the "wind" and his unicorn guide, Gaudior. In Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved*, Sara Louise struggles with the darkness of her own soul in the quest for her sense of identity and a meaningful existence, battling low self-esteem, bitterness, and a deep fear of rejection in the negative prophecy that she is like Esau, apparently the hated one. And in Little's *Willow and Twig*, Willow is on an arduous journey of courage where she must in a sense harden her heart against the mother she loves in order to have courage for her journey to well-being.

As an activity, students could choose a particularly critical moral dilemma in a character's journey and develop this through possibilities such as (a) deeper exploration of the issue from the character's immediate or later perspective; (b) dialogue with another or invented character; or (c) an alternative to the plotline where the character contemplates his poor or excellent choice. (Again, see the above five suggested activities that could be applied with any theme). Also, in many cases a character has been given a particular, sometimes magical, gift in order to do battle. Meg in *A Wrinkle in Time* has been given glasses that have the power to rearrange the atoms; Sara Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved*, arguably, has the gift of (or aptitude for) tremendous perseverance. Students could choose or invent a gift that a character has been given and apply that in a transformed literary response. For example, imagine a loved one or an enemy is in danger and you're the only one who can save him. Take your special gift—perhaps which you can use only once—and go to battle. Any and all of these stories and activities invite readers inside the experience of struggling to make good moral choices.

Conclusion

The fact that moral education can be practised badly, in a reductive, non-engaging, and alienating way, should not be the literature teacher's excuse to fail to practise it at all. Instead, we should consider the unique power of good literature and imaginative pedagogy to influence the reader's moral development. We are not just in the business of training students for keen analytical thought and writing, but in the business of doing all this with the ultimate vision of their well-being. The attempt to

impact our literature students with such an ethic of care—to foster caring, humane thinkers—could well be our highest mandate after all.

Note

1. This quote comes from a journal written by a student in my Curriculum Development course at Simon Fraser University, 2004, and is cited with permission from the author.

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